

Moral Libertarian Perspective: John Rawls and the Veil of Ignorance

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Contemporary liberalism is heavily influenced by the ideas of John Rawls. In particular, his veil of ignorance theory has had a very strong impact on liberal thinking. Essentially, Rawls argued that people should make decisions under a 'veil of ignorance' about their own position in society, for such decisions to be truly impartial and hence offer equal opportunity to everyone. Here, I will argue that the Rawlsean veil of ignorance actually complements the moral libertarian principle of Equal Moral Agency (EMA) very well.

Firstly, a recurrent criticism of liberalism is that its individualistic orientation encourages individuals to be selfish. Liberalism has been characterized by some as a system that encourages individuals to focus on pursuing their self interests. However, if individuals are encouraged to act under the Rawlsean veil of ignorance, they will be making decisions removed from their own self interests. This shows that liberalism, especially a liberalism that is guided by strong moral principles, does not have to be inherently selfish.

Secondly, I would argue that making democratic decisions under the veil of ignorance is effectively the same as upholding the principle of Equal Moral Agency. This is because, under the veil of ignorance where one supposedly does not know where they stand, one would generally make decisions that will not disadvantage people in any given position in society. This means that such decisions would have to adhere as closely as possible to distributing moral agency equally among every individual. Therefore, for those unsure of how to uphold Equal Moral Agency in collective decisions, the veil of ignorance is perhaps the best starting point.

Finally, the Rawlsean veil of ignorance effectively prevents all forms of divisive identity politics. When one is not supposed to know one's identity in society in the first place, how can one practice identity politics at all? The disabling of identity politics also disables a variety of illiberal ideologies, including race-based nationalism, the Oppression Olympics, trans-exclusionary radical feminism (TERF), and neo-Marxist class struggle revolutionary politics (where identity groups replace the economic classes in orthodox Marxism) alike. Hence practising thinking from a veil of ignorance point of view is a good way to ensure we stay true to liberal values and practices.

In conclusion, while the Rawlsean veil of ignorance concept is not the same as the moral libertarian Equal Moral Agency principle, the two are sort of similar, and complement each other very well.